

Case Study:

Salford Data Quay

Type: Website

Organisation(s): Salford City Council

Tags: open data, process, metadata, standards

The [Salford Data Quay](#) (SDQ) is a local authority datastore run by Salford City Council, which publishes data on the local area, almost exclusively drawn from council and government datasets.

The logo for Salford Data Quay, featuring the word "Salford" in a dark blue serif font and "DATA QUAY" in a white sans-serif font inside a dark blue rectangular box.

Although it is a relatively small scale, local project, SDQ contains 52 raw datasets, which together provide a very useful overview of council operations as well as facilities and infrastructure around Salford.

The datastore includes automatic updates that ensure that data is still usable and of high quality. However, the datastore does not have a dedicated resource or capacity, and it is not a major focus on the council's current digital agenda.

Background

[Salford Data Quay \(SDQ\)](#) was launched in 2015 through an initial [£31,000 grant](#) from central government in the form of the [Open Data Breakthrough Fund](#) as a local portal to complement regional and national portals. The initial mission statement was to 'improve the opportunities for people and their communities in Salford'.

A third-party provider designed the basic framework for the SDQ on [CKAN](#) (Comprehensive Knowledge Archive Network). This is an open-source data portal that provides tools for data publishing organisations, to find, share, and use data. This portal has served the SDQ since then and has required no ongoing maintenance or adaption of its basic design.

[Data Mill North](#) has been one inspiration for the SDQ project, which was initially intended to have a wider scope, allowing publication of other organisations' data. However, this proved to be difficult to sell to external organisations, who would have to invest time and money for unclear and delayed rewards. Limited resources also meant there was little success in this area.

Much of the work of the SDQ now involves the automatic publication of central government datasets as they appear on the data.gov.uk website or are published at a Greater Manchester level.

Salford Council has been a leader in digital innovation, with the council recognised in 2018 as Digital Council of the Year. A commitment to digital reform is evident among key decision-makers, such as the Director of Service Reform, the Chief Executive, and the Mayor. However, a lot of the recent work has been around the Transformation Project, which aims to improve the efficiency of customer services, and drive data-informed decision-making. One of the Great Eight priorities for the city council is to be "A transparent effective organisation", with data seen as an important aspect of that transparency, but the SDQ has not necessarily acted as the coordinating vehicle for this.

Important considerations

Content and Quality

The platform still works well after several years with few fundamental changes. It is easy to navigate, easy for the user to find a required dataset, and several file types are usually available for each dataset.

Metadata are well curated, accurate, and included in a standard table. This includes key information for all datasets such as data source and frequency of updates, which data publishers can quickly and easily fill in.

The datasets are split into thematic categories, with most datasets falling under the [Government & Citizens](#), [Leisure & Culture](#), and [Planning & Building](#) themes. The theme [Community Safety](#) is empty, whilst [Advice and Benefits](#) only contains one dataset.

There is a strong focus on datasets immediately available to the council for publication, such as the location of key amenities like rights of way and recycling centres, as well as governance and transparency data. The Data Quay is clearly and deliberately well targeted to the needs of the general public.

Initially, there was a push towards [5 star linked data](#), but whilst this suited the technical aspirations of those involved with the project, it proved unrealistic for the wider organisation and council officers who would publish data on the Data Quay. Data beyond 2-3 stars would require advanced technical skills that are unreasonable to expect from those who would be regularly interacting with these data. The platform has adjusted to these needs and focuses on high-quality primary datasets instead.

It is important to consider that, where a dataset is aimed at data enthusiasts and the open data community, it is more important to provide raw CSV datasets, as this audience may not demand data visualisations. For most potential data users, however, clear presentation and good quality visuals are more important to ensure accessibility and comprehension.

Usage

The most popular data sets on the SDQ have proved to be [business rates](#) (CSV), the city [council organisation chart](#) (PDF), city council [public toilet locations](#) (HTML, CSV), and [conservation areas](#) (GEOJSON, WMS, WFS, HTML).

Interestingly, business rates have had the highest uptake. The main driver for releasing the data was to reduce Freedom of Information requests, which the high usage suggests it is likely to have done. However, they also have huge value for the business community in understanding the range of businesses across Salford. Experian and other list-building companies benefit from collecting SDQ lists, incorporating them into existing products, and identifying new businesses. However, there is a significant manual process involved in cleaning this dataset before release. This adds value, but takes time.

In terms of website usage, the Council uses Google Analytics to monitor the website. However, there has been no individual or team driving forward analytics of the SDQ for further insights.

Salford Council has not identified any innovations that have come directly from the use of SDQ data. Interest from grassroots data enthusiasts in data produced by Salford City Council was greater when the Greater Manchester Data Synchronisation Project was still in operation, and when the EU's INSPIRE project began. However, engagement has fallen over time and there have not been the resources available to actively promote SDQ.

Blockers and challenges

Despite the local authority being very strong on IT and data, it has proved difficult to draw up a business case to show the value of investing in a linked dataset. This is partly because of the difficulty of demonstrating that the demand exists. This is a 'Catch-22 situation', since demand and external interest have to first be fostered and incubated, which is difficult without an existing supply.

Although there is a broad commitment to open data across the local authority, the SDQ has not always provided the focus and coordination for this that it might have done. This has resulted in individual services publishing data to various pages across the city council website, rather than the SDQ acting as a single portal through which users can access all such data. This also means that there is a lack of clear goals and principles for open data, and no single overview of issues such as data quality, format, accessibility and updating, though there is currently no indication that this has created any significant problems.

The technical problem of creating a functioning portal has been solved, but its potential wider value is probably not being fully realised at present.

Finally, although this has ultimately not been necessary within the current remit, a lack of in-house coding skills has made it difficult to add dynamic additional functionalities to the portal.

FOI Requests and Encouraging Uptake

One way the team involved with the SDQ has successfully made a case for the platform's value has been reducing FOI request caseload.

This is even more so since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. There have been large numbers of requests coming in relating to COVID-19 and particularly the situation in adult social care. This has once again highlighted the importance of managing data well, and publishing regularly by default before FOI requests come through, to reduce work volumes and become more transparent.

What can Greater Manchester take from this?

- With relatively modest seed money, public sector organisations can create a well-functioning datastore providing data on local facilities and services.
- Even when there is a commitment to the digital agenda within an organisation, raising ambitions beyond this can present a challenge.
- Strong leadership at the top of an organisation, as well as committed and enthusiastic project leads, is crucial to the success of open data projects.
- There are key stakeholders to convince at every stage of a project's development: making the initial case for open data; when pushing to publish a specific dataset; and when working to develop common and consistent data standards.
- To be successful in the longer term, open data work needs to be a long-term strategic business priority for Greater Manchester, and not just something the leaders push.
- It can be challenging to secure commitment to high-quality data management. It is important to focus on the incentives that are most concrete, such as reducing numbers of FOI requests. However, buy-in needs to run deeper than this to secure commitment to a more ambitious and high quality open data programme.
- It is important to find novel ways to secure greater buy-in by external organisations to engage in an open portal. This is a major challenge and demands clear articulation of the benefits and opportunities, given that the value created by publishing data is often not directly accrued by the organisation that does so.

- It is difficult to justify investment in high quality linked data, not least because demand for such data must be proven to decision-makers. Making the case where this demand is not yet evident requires clear strategies and justifications.
- Data formats should be targeted based on the expertise and knowledge of both the users of the data and the council officers collating the information. The publication process must be simple enough for non-expert users to navigate.
- The existing tech community interested in linked data and hackathon is fairly small. An open data project should not rely on spontaneous success from these groups in creating useful apps and tools with the data. To increase usage of data, is important to find ways to actively encourage and drive the development of this community where it does not yet exist at the scale needed.

Further Information

<https://salforddataquay.uk/about>

<https://www.local.gov.uk/sites/default/files/documents/Salford%20Data%20A%20Local%20Plan%20for%20Local%20data%202015.pdf>